8 March: International Women's Day

International Women's Day (8 March) is not only an occasion marked by women's groups around the world. This date is also commemorated at the United Nations and is designated in many countries as a national holiday. When women on all continents, often divided by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to celebrate their day, they can look back to a tradition that represents almost a century of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development.

International Women's Day is the story of ordinary women as makers of history; it is rooted in the centuries-old struggle of women to participate in society and social change on an equal footing with men. In ancient Greece, Lysistrata initiated a sexual strike against men in order to end war; during the French Revolution, Parisian women calling for "liberty, equality, fraternity" marched on Versailles to demand women's suffrage.

The idea of an International Women's Day first arose at the turn of the century, which in the industrialized world was a period of expansion and turbulence, booming population growth and radical ideologies. Following is a brief chronology of the most important events:

1909: In accordance with a declaration by the Socialist Party of America, the first National Women's Day was observed across the United States on 28 February. Women continued to celebrate it on the last Sunday of that month through 1913.

1910: The Socialist International, meeting in Copenhagen, established a Women's Day, international in character, to honour the movement for women's rights

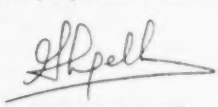
Rededicating ourselves to work together

International Women's Day—8 March—will have a special significance for both women and men this year. The United Nations celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year, and the Fourth World Conference on Women will be held in Beijing in September. This day also occurs during the World Conference on Social Development, when world leaders are meeting in Copenhagen to discuss the issues of poverty, unemployment and social integration.

International focus is now on these issues as well as on others which are of particular concern to women, such as population growth, health, violence against women, access to decision making and sharing of power, women's human rights and contribution to safeguarding the environment. These and other concerns form the basis of the Platform for Action which will be discussed at the Beijing Conference and which spells out precise actions to realize the goals of the Conference—equality, development and peace.

We now have the opportunity for the international community to commit itself and take action to accelerate equality between women and men and to ensure their equal participation in all spheres of public and private life. At this critical time, we all must prepare to use our skills, experience, knowledge, and vision to facilitate action by governments and international and non-governmental organizations to achieve these goals. We have to work to find new ways of ordering our societies and promote new models and strategies for securing justice, peace and sustainable development.

The time is right for us—men and women—to rededicate ourselves to work together for the removal of all obstacles to the advancement of women. Success in these endeavours will be the greatest contribution we can make to the well-being of future generations and to the continued success of the United Nations, as it celebrates its first half-century and the world prepares to enter a new millennium.



Gertrude Mongella
Secretary-General
Fourth World Conference on Women

UNITED NATIONS

Women

and freedom and to assist in achieving universal suffrage for women. No fixed date was selected.

1911: As a result of the decision taken at Copenhagen the previous year, International Women's Day was marked for the first time (19 March) in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, where more than 1 million women and men attended rallies. In addition to the right to vote and to hold public office, they demanded the right to work, to vocational training and to an end to discrimination on the job.

Less than a week later, on 25 March, the tragic Triangle Fire in New York City took the lives of more than 140 working girls, most of them Italian and Jewish immigrants. This event had a significant impact on labour legislation in the United States, and the working conditions leading up to the disaster were invoked during subsequent celebrations of International Women's Day.

1913-1914: As part of the peace movement brewing on the eve of World War I, Russian women observed their first International Women's Day on the last Sunday in February, 1913; elsewhere in Europe, on or around 8 March of the following year, women held rallies either to protest the war or to express solidarity with their sisters.

1917: With 2 million Russian soldiers dead in the war, Russian women again chose the last Sunday in February to strike for "bread and peace". Political leaders opposed the timing of the strike, but the women went out anyway, and the rest is history. Four days later, the Czar was forced to abdicate; the provisional Government granted women the right to vote. That historic Sunday fell on 23 February on the Julian calendar in use elsewhere. International Women's Day has usually been celebrated on 8 March ever since.

Since those early years, International Women's Day has assumed a new global dimension for women in developed and developing countries alike. It has become a rallying point for coordinated efforts to demand women's rights and participation in the political process. Increasingly, Women's Day is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of women's rights.

From General Assembly resolution 32/142

The General Assembly,

...Taking into account that secure peace and social progress, the establishment of the new international economic order as well as the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms require the active participation of women, their equality and development,

Appreciating the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security and to the struggle against colonialism, racism, racial discrimination, foreign aggression and occupation and all forms of foreign domination...

2. *Calls upon* all States to continue to make their contribution to creating favourable conditions for the elimination of discrimination against women and for their full and equal participation in the social development process and to encourage broad participation of women in the effort to strengthen international peace, extend the process of international détente, curb the arms race and take measures for disarmament;...

4. *Invites* all States to proclaim, in accordance with their historical and national traditions and customs, any day of the year as United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace and to inform the Secretary-General thereon;...

105th plenary meeting
16 December 1977

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Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
Printed by the United Nations Reproduction Section, New York
DPI/1596/Mon—94-50680— February 1995 — 30M